

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 377

EC 231 191

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TITLE Physically Disabled Students: The Challenge to Community Schools.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (68th, Toronto, Canada, April 23-27, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consultation Programs; *Delivery Systems; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Intervention; Itinerant Teachers; *Mainstreaming; *Physical Disabilities; Program Development; *Resource Teachers; *Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS Ontario (Toronto)

ABSTRACT

Schools in the Toronto (Ontario, Canada) area have established a Resource Teacher Service (RTS) to provide necessary educational program supports for physically disabled students, their teachers, and their schools when community school placements are indicated. The principles of intervention emphasized in the RTS include pragmatic forms of assistance; collaborative relationships which stress parity, mutual respect, and team relationships; and promotion of ideas and approaches useful with both disabled and nondisabled students. Services available include educational diagnostic assessment, program development, consultation, itinerant instruction, technology support, inservice training, and disability awareness. A questionnaire was distributed to the various constituents of the RTS, such as parents, administrators, teachers, and educational assistants. Results showed that the program's high degree of specialization and intensive level of direct contact and individualization were generally well received. In general, the RTS met most expectations. Issues to be addressed in the future include: long-term planning for educational needs, more collaborative team work, training teachers with respect to assistive technology, and better planned workstation environment in the regular classroom. Includes four references. (JDD)

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Physically Disabled Students - The Challenge to Community Schools

A Paper Presented for the International CEC Conference
April 1990, Toronto, Canada

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Introduction

Special education services and programs in Ontario schools are subject to the laws and regulations outlined by the Ontario Ministry of Education. In 1985 Bill 82 took effect in the province of Ontario which made special education services mandatory and defined exceptionalities and the processes for identification, review and placement. This law is comparable to Public Law 94-142 in the United States.

Physically disabled students in more recent years have been entering regular and special education classrooms in community schools. These students in the greater Toronto area have been largely served through educational programs and services operated at the Metro level. The Metro Toronto School Board represents six local boards of education within the greater Toronto area. This board administers several Metro wide special education programs (e.g. visually impaired, hearing impaired ect.). A Metro wide committee for each special education program with representatives from each board participating in the Metro structure exists to supervise the programs and their respective budgets. In this model physically disabled students have been historically served through segregated special education classes and schools (a few mildly disabled students have always attended community schools however usually without official designation and consequently only with informal kinds of assistance). The educational service delivery system has become increasingly diversified to respond to a wider range of student educational needs and to provide a continuum of service delivery options. In response to both forementioned factors a Resource Teacher Service for physically disabled students was established to provide the necessary educational program supports to the student, their teachers, and schools when a community school placement was indicated.

The integration of exceptional students has been promoted by some parents, advocacy groups and progressive professionals. The debate related to integration is too often guided solely by ideological concerns and less by an objective assessment of the individual student's needs. The approach to integration taken by this program is a very practical one that looks at concrete forms of assistance and support that make the integration experience both feasible and meaningful for all concerned.

The principles of intervention emphasized in the Resource Teacher

Service (RTS) include pragmatic forms of assistance (realism, concrete hands on intervention); collaborative relationships which stress parity, mutual respect and team relationships; and finally ideas and approaches that are useful with disabled students are also beneficial to the non-disabled student.

The Resource Teacher Model

The mandate of the RTS is to provide service to any physically disabled student attending a community school in Metropolitan Toronto. These students can have additional disabling conditions however they must primarily have a physical handicap and be considered within the educable range of cognitive functioning. A physical disability in this context refers to students with orthopaedic, neurological and health related difficulties both congenital and acquired that gives rise to learning problems or the necessity of program modification. When the program was initiated in 1987 the mandate included only elementary students but was changed in 1989 to also include secondary students.

Students are referred to the RTS by school staff in conjunction with the parents. The referral is channelled through board representatives for each of the participating boards at Metro.

The services which are available through RTS include: educational diagnostic assessment, program development, consultation, itinerant instruction, technology support, inservice training and disability awareness. Flexibility in the nature and intensity of this service is very critical to sufficiently respond to the identified needs of individual cases. Assessment in this situation means more than assessing the student but requires a careful examination of the student's total situation at both home and school. Intervention must consider factors within the student, the learning environment and the interaction between the student and the learning environment.

This model is collaborative in that the program structurally involves reaching across many boards of education with independent jurisdiction. Metro wide special education programs and services can only be effective through board representatives participating in the various steering committees which establish policy, budget and serve a co-ordinating

function. Collaboration is also the philosophy that this program adopts as its underpinning for guiding the interaction between the RTS and the referring team. This model assumes a shared responsibility for the delivery of educational programs and services to physically disabled students in the Metropolitan Toronto area. In the past the development of special education services and programs has been interpreted by some professionals as a way of transferring responsibility to the experts. Collaboration challenges this notion by emphasizing joint ownership of the program with its ensuing problems and successes. Those who have been working in a mode of passing responsibility to special programs will need to adjust to a collaborative model while those who have been denied participation because of expert ownership are surely to benefit. In this author's experience of intervention with teachers of physically disabled students in community schools it is the latter group and its empowerment that can most effectively bring about positive change in community schools.

Main Thrusts of Intervention

The main thrusts of intervention include issues related to written communication, educational assessment, curriculum modifications and finally itinerant instruction.

Written communication is by far the largest single reason for referral to the RTS. This is not surprising given the population served and their need to compensate for motor difficulties. While the computer has evolved in recent years as a solution to written communication problems for physically disabled students it has not been without creating new problems. These problems seem to be experienced more by the student in regular classes attending community schools. Issues such as space, cost and organizational demands are a few problems to be considered when implementing technology to compensate for written communication problems.

Educational assessment is often requested to assist in establishing appropriate expectations. The assessment can be useful by explaining educational problems in terms of relating specifically to the physical disability (e.g. problems related to memory, visual motor functioning ect.). It can also be useful in terms of spotting potential areas of the

curriculum which may require modification. A variety of assessment techniques such as observation, formal measures, informal measures, interview, background information, comparative peer assessments and curriculum based measures are necessary to get a holistic profile that is reliable and accurate.

Curriculum modifications require a full understanding of the student's disability. Modifications are suggested while considering the integrity of the curriculum. It is important that these modifications are explicitly clear to the student so that false expectations with respect to performance are not unintentionally created. There are no simple formulas to guide the modification process and thus teachers must look carefully at the demands of the task while considering the abilities of the student. The most difficult modifications for teachers to accept usually involve measures to modify the evaluation process.

Itinerant instruction as a thrust in intervention is initially used as a means to translate an assessment to a concrete program with goals and strategies. This aspect of intervention also considers realistically the time, energy and expertise level of teachers with physically disabled students in addition to their regular classroom duties.

In an endeavour to develop more effective intervention and collaboration an informal survey in the form of a questionnaire was distributed to the various constituents of the RTS such as parents, administrators, teachers and educational assistants.

Survey Feedback

This survey was conducted in an informal manner and as such does not represent a formal evaluation of the program. The goal of this survey was to gather feedback and impressions that could be constructive for the purpose of changing or confirming various aspects of the program as a whole.

The initial part of the questionnaire was concerned with administrative issues such as the referral process and the mandate. The referral process is complicated by the two levels of school boards in Metro and thus the service delivery is a little remote from the community school. It has taken awhile for principals and board representatives to get the referral process clear however with time it seems that a network is

emerging of key players who are accessing the service more and more.

The mandate was perceived by most to be clear although a few thought it may be a little too broad. In these cases there was some concern about the duplication of services with their own school based special services that serve learning disabled students through a withdrawal model. This situation has led to a greater consideration for the long term program planning of physically disabled students in designated school sites. In these settings the RTS is moving from a situation of long term direct intensive service to the students to providing initial assessment with a gradual transfer to the school based special education program (if they exist) and providing consultation services to the professionals who may be very experienced in special education but not with the physically disabled as a population.

In terms of the mandate the question was asked how this service was different or similar to other services offered to your students. The responses to this question indicated the high degree of specialization but also many indicated the intensive level of direct contact and individualization. This aspect of service delivery was generally well received and contrasts with those services that are built solely around the consultation model. Consultation services are very necessary with scarce resources but they are problematic in that they may not have a significant impact due to the intensity of service required for the particular situation. This issue will be an important one as the caseload grows with the RTS and whether the quality of intensive direct contact can be maintained while an increasing number of students are referred for service. The Metro committee which supervises the RTS program has done a report which examines the possibility of developing a waiting list, consideration for hiring further staff and a proposal for a scale of services to include monitoring to full service itinerant instruction as options for intervention.

The next part of the questionnaire attempted to get a view for the level of satisfaction and how well expectations were met. In general it was reported that the RTS met most expectations. Some found it difficult to answer because the service was so novel that they had little if anything to compare it to. There was one response that indicated that given the time devoted expectations were well met but that more time and support to the teacher would be even more effective. A further response found the individual sessions disruptive to the class and conference time

reduced teacher's preparation time.

In the last section of the survey individuals were asked to comment on unmet needs and suggestions for improvement. Some unmet needs include dissatisfaction with the gym program, a desire for more emphasis on independence, better planned workstations and more inservice training for teachers. The suggestions for improvements included better communication with all staff in school with respect to student expectations, bi-weekly sessions, realistic requests of regular classroom teachers and instructing small groups of students within the regular class. The issues raised by this feedback are difficult to analyse because each situation is so unique with respect to the schooling and learning situation. It is very clear however that there is a strong desire for more support and especially for those teachers in the regular classroom. This feedback reinforces some of the difficult issues in terms of the author's experience with intervention. Most notably are the problems with particular aspects of the curriculum such as gym where compromises are essential and the issue of independence which often gets superficial interpretation in that it is seen only from the physical dimension of the student. Accessibility of the environment and the psychological aspects of self esteem and independence unfortunately are not well understood. These issues require careful consideration and experience before they can be applied in specific cases and one can hardly expect teachers moving into this area to fully grasp them with their full implications (especially when their experience may only be with one student). Considering this feedback the most important recommendation made involves the provision of teacher inservicing to develop a deeper understanding of the physically disabled student in the context of the community school.

Issues for the Future

Some important issues to address in the future include:

- i) long term planning for the educational needs of physically disabled students at designated school sites
- ii) more collaborative team work especially with professionals in the health care sector
- iii) the introduction and training of teachers with respect to technology that aids the disabled student

- iv) better planned workstation environments for students in the regular classroom.

Designated school sites for the disabled require more than ramps and bars to create physical access. There needs to be a long term plan to provide the necessary resources for the educational program. Expertise with learning disabilities among the physically disabled population, facility with technology, experience with disabled children and their families and familiarity with various medical conditions are a few of the skills professionals doing programming for physically disabled students require. These skills can best be developed by a dual track service delivery system that focuses on intensive support for the student in the community school and secondly through inservice programs that identify and articulate key issues for teachers working with physically disabled students. In response to the need for inservice training a pilot workshop for teachers with physically disabled students in community schools was implemented this year with very encouraging results. The workshop evaluations indicated a desire to explore further assessment and programming for physically disabled students in community schools. Through a direct link between the individual students served by the RTS and the participant teachers in the workshop a greater sense of relevancy and utility was established.

The development of effective programs for physically disabled students has always rested in part on the team approach to service delivery. Community schools can often be confused and sometimes intimidated by the cast of professionals that serve physically disabled students. In this context there is always a great risk of role confusion and poor communication. In this author's opinion it should be the role of consulting professionals to establish a climate of collaborating with school based professionals. Expertise based consultation services can be ineffective when they intimidate or alienate community based educators. This is not something done consciously but rather arises from expert based service delivery models that tend to place an undue emphasis on hierarchical power relationships. Consequently this can lead to resentment which undermines the relationship for a team approach. Experts are perceived to hold a lot of power where as collaborative based models establish parity by looking at special services as not better but simply different. This is especially appropriate when integrating

physically disabled students in community schools. The special resource person serving the physically disabled student has to rely equally on the expertise of community educators working in that school, division and community to develop the best possible program fit in individual circumstances. Supporting a collaborative service delivery is easy and a bit like supporting motherhood however to practise collaborative team relationships is far more difficult. In this author's experience it is useful to begin with a shared definition of the problem focus (e.g. reason for referral or in other words what forms of assistance can be useful). The shared definition becomes crucial to the collaborative nature of the intervention which unfolds.

The introduction of technology to teachers can be very critical to the eventual success of a physically disabled student integrated in a community school. It is important that technology is introduced in ways that are non-threatening. Teachers need to have realistic attitudes about what it will and will not do. Sometimes in our enthusiasm to assist the student we may inadvertently promote false expectations with respect to the impact of technology. The introduction of technology initially makes more work for everyone concerned until the student develops independent use. Educationally we must work to integrate the computer and the selection of software with the aims and objectives of the educational program. Finally we need to provide our own consultation and support to others in ways that fosters independence. This can best be accomplished by a slow non-threatening introduction followed by a clear direction in supporting the existing aims and objectives for the students educational program.

The development of more effective workstation environments in the context of regular classrooms is hampered by practical considerations such as cost, space and the necessity of individual design. Traditional approaches to the storage of learning materials is for some disabled students not appropriate given their physical limitations but additionally create further problems for self organization. Inevitably assignments get lost and the student develops an unhealthy dependence on others for the organization of their learning materials. In some cases these workstations must accomodate a writing aid and a desk top area for traditional media (texts ect.). The use of computers with loose paper for writing can create problems of organization and storage that needs careful attention by the teacher and the student. The development of a

well thought out workstation for physically disabled students in the regular classroom requires a collaborative team effort from all the professional disciplines working with the student.

Summary

The Resource Teacher Service is attempting to evolve with certain principles to guide the delivery of educational services to physically disabled students attending community schools. Those principles include a commitment to intervention based on realistic and practical considerations, collaborative team relationships and finally reflective practice. We know from the survey feedback that practical forms of assistance in the form of direct intervention are both necessary and highly valued. The experience of multi-disciplinary team approaches with a strong emphasis on discipline specific expertise can in its more extreme form of practise alienate community based educators. It is critical that the basis for collaborative team relationships be established through parity, mutual respect and a balanced holistic assessment of the student's needs. Finally the principle of reflective practice seems more and more relevant in today's increasingly complex and ever changing world. Professionals providing support to community schools need to develop an ongoing dialogue with their constituents (parents, students, teachers and administrators) so there is a consistent match between the approaches, methods ect. and the identified needs.

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